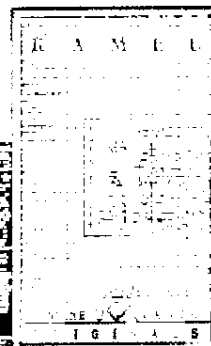


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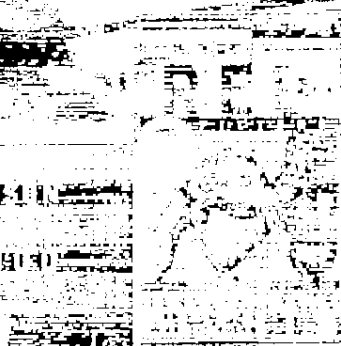
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BACK TO THE MOUNTAINS

EXCEPT FOR THE MOUNTAINS



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When I first heard that Tupac had died, I was glad. Real glad. In fact, I wished that all gangsta rappers were dead. Not that I buy the arguments of those who feel that gangsta rap glamorizes violence (which it so obviously does) or the defense that it is reflecting the world as it really is (as it so obviously is). I am ashamed to say that until recently I didn't really care. And then someone close to me was shot dead in a drive-by.

The entire rap debate struck me as one of those pseudo-issues crafted to revolve endlessly without being resolved; its real purpose is to fill media space the way trash is used as landfill. In my liberal ignorance, I used to think that rap was really no more than harmless name-calling or a particularly macho kind of urban vogueing. But many of these gangsta rappers really are the natural-born killaz they crow about being in their songs. And now I can't listen to any of it anymore.

It was different when Ennis was alive. Ennis was 12 when I first met him, after the L.A. riots (or L.A. uprising, if you prefer). I was producing a documentary about life in Los Angeles. The two-and-a-half-hour feature, shown on the BBC, was to consist entirely of video diaries made by 10 Los Angelenos from all walks of life. I picked Ennis as one of the diarists, a truant kid who lived in South Central just around the corner from the flash point of the riots at Florence and Normandie. In the year it took to make the program, I and almost everyone else working on it became friends with this funny, smart, unruly kid. He used to ride around in our car, cranking the radio's volume and sort of singing—well, rapping (or actually more like vocalizing)—along to gangsta tunes, the more hardcore the better. Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg were the flava then.

The first piece of videotape Ennis shot showed him outside his shack, expressing the hope that he might live to be "25 or more." I laughed when I saw it because I thought he was just being a kid who thinks that 25 is incredibly ancient (as I remember thinking when I was 12). He said he wanted to be a gangsta rapper and asked if we could get him a deal with an indie label he knew we had some dealings with at the time. One day he said he had a demo tape to give me. I had expected a cassette, but instead it was a videotape of him in front of the camera wearing cool shades, a red sweatshirt and red bandanna, flashing gangsta signs and vocalizing along to the radio. He only knew the bad words, so it kind of went "Mumble mumble mumble, er—motherfucka—mumble, er, mumble." A little bit later on the tape he pretended to be falling-down drunk, waving an imaginary 40-ounce. He was a great performer, but not a nat-

ural-born rapper. I never sent the tape to him. By the time the documentary was finished, my colleagues and I had kind of gone from being just friends with him to being big brothers and sisters. And we knew it was time to get him back into school. None of the public schools wanted anything to do with him, so we found a private school that did. Things were fine for awhile. But after his fresh-out-of-jail brother scratched a gang tattoo on Ennis' arm and he started collecting police citations, we realized we had to get him out of South Central. We got him a scholarship to a boarding school in Mississippi. Problem solved.

But then he got kicked out and we didn't know what to do next. A few weeks later, back in the 'hood, he was walking along the street, wearing that red sweatshirt we had seen in his demo. He knew the significance of the colors and the foolishness of wearing them outside. Anyway, a car drove by, the passengers yelling "gangsta epithets" (as the paper put it), and shot him down. He wasn't dead at this point, only wounded. So a kid got out of the car, walked up to him lying on the ground and shot him repeatedly at point-blank range until he was dead. It was a few days before his 16th birthday.

Gangsta Crap

Remembering one of its many victims.

In the months since then, all I've really felt is a gathering rage at the gangsta lifestyle, the gangsta rappers and all their kid-brother wannabes. The last straw was reading one-time gang-banger Monster Scott Cody's book, *Monster*, to try and better understand the gang thang. The title was no lie. Boasting a body count that's up there with any serial killer, he describes his lifelong killing spree with some pride and no remorse. The only emotion expressed is resentment at the police for banging him up for a crime he says he did not commit. He also suggests that he is unfairly rotting in the prison system. I'm in no rush for his release. In fact, if they do ever let him out, I hope it's in a box.

Because I'm white, I think that I may be part of the whole gangster problem, which gets traced back through inner-city blues to racism and oppression. I wonder if the mere

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But
screw that. Ennis was my friend who took me for who I was, and I owe it to him to speak up about his murder.

In truth, the issue has nothing to do with color, ghetto hardship or any other bogus considerations. It doesn't even have much to do with gangsta rap either, except that, like the drive-by killings, both are evidence of a lifestyle that trashes the sacredness of human life. To take a kid's life over the color of his sweatshirt is an inhuman thing to do. And, by extension, rapping about shooting people is also pretty low, as is packaging and selling that shit.

Don't get mad, get even, I have entertained fantasies of shooting the kid who shot Ennis, but piling up more bodies is not the solution. And I'm no longer glad Tupac is dead; although I'm not exactly filled with remorse—no one deserves to die before their time. Not even—though I say it through clenched teeth—Monster Cody. But least of all a kid like Ennis, who harmed no one. ★

planet pop by fenton bailey



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illustration: mark gagnon